

#03 Get Back (NORA)

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Final Fantasy XIII: Reminiscence -tracer of memories-

#03 Get Back (Nora)

| *"NORA is even stronger than the army!"*

All that was written on the scrap of paper she—the unidentified woman I had met alongside Sazh Katzroy—had given me was something which appeared to be the name of a store and its location.

I had never heard of it. A cafe restaurant establishment came up when I looked it up, but to me it only looked like the kind of joint you could find anywhere. It wasn't even in any guidebooks or the like. I couldn't see anything special about it from the photograph.

So, I have decided to go and see it with my own eyes.

I take a plane to a beach in the far south. I know it is haphazard of me to make a data collection trip on the basis of one questionable note, without any guarantee of being able to meet anyone. However, for some reason, I cannot curb the feeling that I have to go there.

At the airport there I climb into a taxi and give the name of the restaurant. The driver looks surprised. Apparently it's a little-known local treasure. They tell me that most of the patrons there live nearby, and that it's rare for non-local tourists and travellers such as myself to visit.

"The food can't be argued with though." It seems the taxi driver is a regular patron, too.

We drive along the coast for a while, and arrive at a cafe that faces the water. The name of the place is NORA House.

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The restaurant is neither too crowded nor too empty, and the patron's friendly chatter creates a pleasant atmosphere. Just as the taxi driver had told me, the patrons seem to be mainly local regulars. They appear to be familiar with the staff, too, creating a ring of casual conversations across the various tables.

I have no idea which dishes are good, so I try ordering the 'NORA Special'.

When I have finished eating, I am bewildered.

It had tasted great. I can't believe that this place isn't famous. I wouldn't sincerely compare it to a full course at a first-class restaurant, but as something meant to be enjoyed while listening to the sound of the waves, the flavour had been exceptional.

It was a stripped-down, honest taste. A nostalgic taste.

Yes, nostalgic.

But... more than simply nostalgic.

—What? What is this feeling?

I can't properly put into words the sensation welling up mistily in my chest.

"I'm sorry, was it not to your liking?"

A young waiter has come over and is apologising to me. It seems that my expression had turned sour as I was lost in thought.

"Oh no," I deny, flustered. "It was absolutely delicious."

The young man, who has blue hair, seems relieved. "I'm glad... To tell you the truth, I was kinda worried. You're not from here, are you, ma'am? Our food has a very 'local' taste, so I wasn't really sure how people not from around here would find it."

"No, I enjoyed it very much, thank you. It's a rather nostalgic taste, I think. It aroused a little homesickness, perhaps I could say, or it reminded me of my hometown. It's not a taste I'd expect from something I was trying for the first time."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realise.

No, that hadn't been the first time.

I know this taste. I've had it many times before.

I *remember* the taste of the food at this restaurant.

There's no mistaking it, it's the taste of her cooking.

—Her? How do I know it's a 'her'?

What was the name of this shop, again? I had felt nothing at the name when I first saw the note in question.

But, now that I've brushed with this flavour, the fact that the name holds a special meaning rises up in my memory.

NORA House—'NORA'.

Now that I am thinking about it, I have heard that word before. It has appeared in several testimonials during my data collection so far. However, compared to keywords such as 'Purge' and 'l'Cie' that affected society in general it is a minor term by far, so I'd put it away in the back of my mind.

It is a word I'd forgotten. A memory I'd nearly lost.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” The blue-haired waiter is staring at me worriedly. I had sunk into silence.

I remember him. Back then, in the midst of the chaos of the battlefield, he had forced down the fear of death and kept his rifle steady. To encourage the people around him, and to raise his own spirits, he had cried out, *“NORA is even stronger than the army!”*

—What is this memory?

The roar of the ocean resounds from outside the window. A place deep in my head is going numb. Memories are breaking, one by one, like waves. The world is going dark.

“What on earth are you feeding the customers to make them pass out?” says a deep voice from beyond the darkness. From the voice alone I can tell it’s a man of great physical stature. “You didn’t use any spoiled stuff now, did you?”

“If I did, I’d serve it straight to you!” returns a headstrong-sounding voice. It’s a woman. “Hey, Yuj, how had she been, do you remember? Did she look unwell?”

“No, she didn’t,” comes the voice of the waiter. Oh yes, his name had been Yuj. “She ate everything on her plate, too.”

“I’d hate to think it was my cooking, though... Gadot, let’s take her to the hospital. Come with me.”

“Okay. I’ll take her out, first. Lebreau, you close up shop before we go.”

I am aware of my body rising up. The man named Gadot has picked me up easily.

I come to my senses.

The ocean is spread out before me. It seems as though I had passed out inside the restaurant and have been laid down on a deck chair on the terrace facing the shore.

“How are you feeling?” asks the big man who had gently lifted me and taken me to the deck chair. His voice is incongruously kind.

“I... feel a great deal better. I think I am fine, now.”

The three of them look relieved.

The muscular giant is Gadot.

The blue-haired waiter is Yuj.

And, the black-haired woman is Lebreau. It is her flavour that I remember.

Suddenly, I need to see something.

“Um, is Mr. Maqui not in today?” I ask.

“No, he’s out scrounging for parts at the junk shop—” Gadot notices it before he finishes his sentence. Lebreau and Yuj both turn pale. “You! How do you know Maqui!?”

Because I remembered.

In that world called Cocoon, whether it is a past life or an alternate universe still unclear, I had met these people.

In the tragedy where innocent people were exiled upon order from their leaders and had their lives taken in attacks by the army—the upheaval of the Purge—a group of young people were there, fighting desperately. They were called ‘NORA’, and, despite not being professional soldiers, picked up arms and took lead in fighting the army for the sake of the townspeople. The members of NORA resisted the army’s attacks and escaped to the no-man’s-land of inner Cocoon with the survivors.

These three and Maqui were the core members of that group. During the days spent in hiding in that harsh environment, each of them held the people up in their own particular way—Gadot with his indomitable fighting spirit, Lebreau with her good character and cooking, Yuj with his heartfelt consideration, and Maqui with his excellent engineering skills.

I was one of those people whom they held up and protected.

I reveal the details of my data collection so far: that I am pursuing people’s memories regarding the world in which Cocoon existed. That I’ve met with Hope and Sazh. What I realised while speaking with Yuj.

“I’ve remembered you. You’re the reckless journalist who sneaked in to expose the reality of the Purge, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I nearly lost my life, but you all saved me. And after that, when we were on the run, thanks to everything you did I was able to protect the footage I’d taken of the Purge monstrosity.”

“Awww! I remember too! You’re the one who blew the lid on the Sanctum and the fal’Cie’s lies by playing the footage of the Purge! You teamed up with Maqui to hack the broadcast, didn’t you?” It seems as though Gadot has remembered.

“And you definitely popped into New Bodhum to see us after the fall, didn’t you?” It appears Lebreau has, too. “I have a feeling you ate my food lots of times. I’m so sorry, you’re by no means a stranger and yet I forgot all about you.”

I should be the one saying that. “I myself forgot. Not just about you people, but about myself, too. Up until now I had no idea what sort of person I was when I lived in ‘that world’. But the taste of the food at this restaurant made me remember. Who I was, I mean...”

“You mean my cooking can cure amnesia? Is that an honour, I wonder?”

“It was probably more like shock treatment. Since it tastes so shocking.”

“Excuse you, Gadot, would you like to run that by me one more time?”

“Uh... Well...”

While Gadot’s huge figure cringes, somebody comes clattering over.

“I’m back! What are you all so excited about?”

“Hey, Maqui. Your timing is terrible. You’re interrupting something.”

“Nooo, you have perfect timing. You saved my ass.”

“...You lost me.”

Yuj, who had been listening in silence, exchanges a look with me, and shrugs as though this is old hat for him. It seems that this is how it is all the time.

That’s right. These silly exchanges happened back then, too. During our harsh lives on the run, chased by the army

and wandering remote areas, they always made trifling conversation with us and made us laugh with them, as though to give us back the ordinary, peaceful lives that had been stolen from us.

We reminisce as kindred spirits as though it is the most natural thing in the world, and I also gain some helpful information.

“I remember you,” says Maqui, when I am leaving. “Back then you were... Ms. ‘Aoede’, right?”

I give a firm nod. It’s different name from who I am now. But, it is definitely my name.

I can now remember everything. My former self was named ‘Aoede’, born and raised in Cocoon, and witness to the moment the Sanctum crumbled after the Purge policy riots. I saw with my own eyes the end of the age of the care and rulership of the fal’Cie, and I saw with my own eyes the beginning of the AF period, where humanity tackled the restoration of civilisation under our own strength.

And, now I have been born again, and am living in this world.

I want to give my thanks to the unidentified woman who told me about this restaurant. Without her guidance I would not have encountered that flavour, and I am sure my memories would not have returned. I have decided: this is how I will continue on from here. No matter how tiny or vague the information, if my instincts tell me something, I will pursue it right to the end.

That said, the information I have gained at this restaurant is not vague. I have information on someone with intimate knowledge of the battle concerning the ‘other world’. Lebreau told me in confidence the whereabouts of Lightning’s younger sister, Serah Farron.

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